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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
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INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 2018
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 9338
RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA 5354
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 9681
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3387
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 5619
RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE 5988
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 4252
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 4197
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/THE WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CANBERRA 000134

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC BADER, BANGKOK FOR RDMA BERGER

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [AS](#)
SUBJECT: WILDFIRE DEATHS STUN AUSTRALIA

REF: MELBOURNE 20

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Action Request. Unprecedented wildfire deaths in Victoria (reftel) on February 7-8 have led to a suspension of Parliament, an outpouring of public grief, and a request for U. S. assistance. With 130 deaths and the destruction of hundreds of households, and the very real possibility of more to come, Australia is reeling from the scale and speed with which the fires have exploded into a tragedy. Post requests that, in addition to providing assistance, a letter of condolence be sent as soon as possible to Prime Minister Rudd, preferably from the President or the Secretary of State. End Summary and Action Request.

ONE OF WORST FIRES EVER

¶2. (SBU) In addition to deploying fire fighting teams from neighboring states, the government has released Australian Defence Force assets, created an initial A\$10 million recovery fund, and is facilitating a widespread investigation into the causes of the fires, many of which are suspected to be arson. The horrible nature of many of the deaths is such that inter-state plans designed to respond to a terrorist attack have been invoked in the effort to identify victims. The wildfires exceed in death and destruction both the 1983 Ash Wednesday disaster and the 1939 Black Friday fires. The death toll would be equivalent to more than 1,787 Americans dying in a wildfire. The fires will take their place among the other wildfire disasters that dominate Australian disaster lore, and will result in widespread efforts to review policies and strategies for dealing with wildfires.

¶3. (SBU) The extent of the damage clearly took both Victoria and Canberra by surprise. On February 9, Prime Minister Rudd, who flew to Victoria on February 8, was joined in offering condolences by members of Parliament, who convened in Canberra but suspended normal business to mark the stunning events. As the scale of the destruction became clear with the penetration of fire and emergency services into affected areas, Post took steps to closely coordinate with the GOA. On February 9, Charge called PM Rudd's foreign policy advisor to inform him that given the loss of life, the U.S. was prepared to offer assistance, including through the 2007 Wildfire Arrangement Between the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture of the United States and

the Australian Participating Agencies, which governs exchange of wildfire reduction assets between the U.S. and Australia. Emergency Management Australia indicated to MDRO on February 9 that a U.S. disaster declaration was not appropriate given the wide range of assets Australia has available to deal with the crisis.

EXCHANGE OFFICER ON THE GROUND

¶4. (SBU) Bodie Shaw, Deputy Director of the U.S. National Interagency Fire Coordination Center, who is on exchange with the Victoria Department of Sustainability and Environment, is leading Post efforts in coordinating its response to the tragedy. Throughout the day on February 9, Shaw worked with DSE to finalize a request for USG assistance under the agreement, which will likely include up to two 13-person Qagreement, which will likely include up to two 13-person burned area reconstruction teams and a fire meteorologist. There is a possibility that Victoria DSE may also request specialized aviation assets. Shaw advised Mission Disaster Response Officer (MDRO) that favorable weather conditions had moved in on February 8 and that immediate crisis conditions were easing, but that additional assistance, including fire crews, may be needed if the fires are not brought under control soon.

¶5. (SBU) Action Request: In addition to the provision of U.S. wildfire fighting and recovery assets, Post suggests that a letter of condolence, along the lines proposed below, be sent immediately at the highest possible level.

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BEGIN TEXT

The Honorable Kevin Rudd
Prime Minister
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Rudd:

On behalf of the American people, please accept my condolence at the loss of life and destruction of property cause by the recent wildfires in Victoria. Although Australia is no stranger to wildfires, the Victoria fires were appalling in their speed and ferocity, as well as in the significant loss of life. I share in the mourning, just as I share in the confidence that Australia will recover and rebuild with a renewed sense of national purpose.

The United States stands ready to provide assistance in whatever way may be most helpful. As Australian and U.S. wildfire crews have done many time in the past, our firefighting experts are ready to travel to Australia to provide any support necessary to enable their counterparts in Victoria to reestablish control of the situation and recuperate to face future fire threats.

Please accept my heartfelt sympathy for the victims and their loved ones at this difficult time.

Sincerely,

END TEXT

¶6. (U) Post also posted a statement of condolence and support on the Mission website and will use it to respond to public and press queries. Text of the statement is as follows:

BEGIN TEXT

I would like to convey my condolences, and those of all of us at the U.S. Embassy and U. S. Consulates across Australia, to the victims of the terrible bushfires in Victoria. Our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones and all those who have lost their homes.

U. S. officials, including wildfire experts, have been in close consultation with Emergency Management Australia and Victorian firefighting authorities. We stand ready to assist our Australian friends at this terrible time.

I would also like to express our concern for those suffering in the Queensland floods. The ongoing devastation to the lives of those in northern Queensland is heartbreaking.

Americans have great affection and empathy for Australians and so I know I can speak for all Americans in sending our best wishes to you in this challenging time.

Daniel Clune

Charge D'Affaires, Embassy of the United States, Canberra

END TEXT

17. (SBU) Comment: While this tragedy does not appear to warrant the declaration of a natural disaster by Post, the death toll has shocked Australians who are used to bush fire deaths, but not used to such a massive event. That many of these deaths are the result of likely arson is even more shocking. The U.S.-Australia Wildfire Agreement provides a unique opportunity to support Australia's hard pressed state emergency services and show support for Australia in this

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tragic event. End Comment.

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